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ABSTRACT

A reading program carried out at the Afro-American Studies Resource Center in Roxbury, Massachusetts, is evaluated in this paper. The program's overall intent was to improve reading skills through improved self concept. The fifty-eight black and brown children who participated were in grades 2, 3, and 4 of the Boston public schools and were six months or more behind in their reading scores. Reading scores were derived primarily from pre-program standardized achievement tests administered by program personnel. The Circle, Inc. approach entailed use of the Cureton instructional strategy, involvement of the total family in the learning, and the employment of culturally relevant instructional materials. The majority of the children made positive gains in their reading scores after ten to twenty months of participation in the program. A minority of children did not show gain, but did show some improvement. (Author/AM)

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An Evaluation of the Circle Incorporated Carnegie Project:

TO IMPROVE READING SKILLS OF BLACK CHILDREN

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Early in 1972, Circle Incorporated of Boston, Massachusetts undertook a Carnegie funded program to improve the reading skills of black children. The program eventually included brown as well as black children. The children to be helped were in grades 2, 3, and 4 of the Boston Public Schools and were six months or more behind in their reading scores. Reading scores were derived primarily from pre-program standardized achievement tests administered by program personnel.

The number of children directly participating in the program was about fifty-eight. The reading program was carried out at the Afro-American Studies Resource Center in Roxbury, Massachusetts under the direction of Vivian Johnson. From the beginning, Vivian Johnson and her colleagues committed themselves to improving both the reading and literacy skills of the children participating in the program. Participating children were designated the experimental group and were pre and post program tested. Evidence of program success would consist in positive gain scores on average for the experimental group.

Before proceeding with summary remarks in evaluation of this program, two points should be emphasized about the students and the school system of which they are a part. First, no child was accepted in the program whose school records did not indicate a dramatic lack of progress in acquisition of basic school skills. Thus, the general remark could be made that these children, left to their own educational devices, would grow progressively behind in their school progress and would, eventually, join that enormous group that has been failed by our city schools. These children, as a group, would be defined as of low socio economic status.

Second, the Boston Public Schools are notable

for at least two characteristics that are of immediate interest. Records of pupil progress on a system-wide basis show that, in the period immediately preceeding and including the duration of this project, black children, as a group, fell progressively further behind in their pupil progress the longer they remained in school. Moreover, the Boston Public Schools, having consistently demonstrated both a failure and a refusal to adequately teach black children, are now subject to court ordered desegregation as a direct consequence of the Boston Public Schools having been found in segregatory violation of the constitutional rights of black children. There is no necessary relationship between the quality of public school instruction and the presence or absence of racial discrimination. Thus might Boston have historically segregated black children while providing them relatively competent instruction. Such was not the case. Beginning in the early 1960's black advocates in Boston sought to improve the quality of schooling for black children with very little attention focused on the racial character of schools. Programs such as "Exodus" were organized and operated by Boston's black community and establish the community's primary interest in the quality of instruction.

The federal suit alleging segregation was filed only after black efforts to improve public school instruction had failed. Boston was eventually convicted of segregation and ordered to desegregate. A black community position paper prepared at the Harvard Graduate School of Education Center for Urban Studies and transmitted to the Federal District Court at the beginning of the 1974-75 school year reasserted the black community's preoccupation with pupil performance as the standard by which desegregation and any other educational change is to be judged. My point is that black Boston's pursuit of desegregation should be understood as a continued pursuit of effective instruction for their children.

Despite the institutional pathology that is inherent in Boston's mixture of incompetent teaching and discriminatory pupil placement, it cannot be said

that the Boston Public Schools are dramatically different from other city school systems in the United States. Therefore, an instructional program that can be judged a success for black children in Boston has enormous implications for all of our city schools. My evaluation of the Circle Incorporated Reading Program will be offered against the backdrop of instructional abuse and discriminatory pupil placement that permeates the Boston Public Schools, culminating in a progressively worsening record of pupil progress for black students.

In my judgement, the Circle Incorporated reading program has been an unqualified success. Specifically, the overwhelming majority of the children made positive gains in their reading scores after ten to twenty months participation in the program.

A minority of the children did not show gain, but did show a dramatic decline in the rate of decline of their reading scores. Remember that, as a group, the longer black children remain in the Boston schools, the more rapidly their reading scores fall. Thus, all of the children have demonstrably profited from participation in the Circle Incorporated Reading Program when compared with the progress of their city-wide counterparts.

As part of my inquiries in preparing these summary remarks, I asked Helen Popp (specialist in reading, and lecturer on education in the Harvard Graduate School of Education) to give me her views on the educational value of the Circle Incorporated Reading Program as administered by Vivian Johnson. Helen Popp, having been both an advisor and teacher to Vivian Johnson, had been familiar with the Circle Incorporated Reading Program since its inception. Moreover, Ms. Popp had, from time to time, reviewed materials descriptive of the reading program and was, therefore, prepared to make summary remarks. In her view, Ms. Johnson's

justification for approaching the program in quite the way she has is ample, considering the circumstances of the children and the school system of which they are a part. Helen Popp offers continued "enthusiastic support" for the instructional strategies used by Ms. Johnson in this program. In sum Ms. Popp believes that Vivian Johnson is "doing the best possible job" given the circumstances in which she finds herself.

Two aspects of the program were given special attention. First, Ms. Popp has analyzed the reading gains of students in the program and is heartened by the pupil progress that has been recorded. Second, Ms. Popp has noted the consistent and supportive interaction between program personnel and the parents of the students. She finds the relationship a model of the potential for positive home-school contact. The nature and success of the Circle Inc. Reading Program is, according to Ms. Popp, an indictment of the nature and extent of home, school contact in the Boston Public Schools. In other words, the success of the Circle Incorporated Reading Program ought, when known, to spur imitation by the Boston Public Schools. According to Ms. Popp, that does not suggest wholesale adoption of the instructional methods used in the program, but it does suggest that some aspects of the Circle program should be seriously considered and, more importantly, that changes ought to occur in Boston to the end of improved reading skills among pupils in the Boston Public Schools.

The foregoing, in sum, is intended to establish the unambiguous instructional success of the Circle Incorporated Carnegie funded project, "To Improve Reading Skills of Black Children." Before proceeding to more elaborate description of the specifics of some aspects of the program, it may be well to establish certain overall perspectives that inform these remarks and to briefly describe the core of the instructional program under discussion. Circle Inc. uses what is nationally and popularly known as "The Cureton Method". George Cureton, a black man who is

a reading specialist, has designed an instructional program called "Action Reading". For our purposes the program has four principal ingredients.

One, A-R is culturally democratic in its affirmation of the culture of the children to be taught. The program explicitly extols the black experience since a part of the instructional milieu is an environment that makes being black a worthy condition.

Two, A-R assumes that school age children have the requisite skills to learn reading. No formal reading readiness activity is pursued. Explicitly children are asked to manipulate instructional materials in ways that presume a mastery of certain motor skills and a knowledge of sequence.

Three, A-R creates and maintains a parent-program relationship that is based on mutual respect. A-R begins with parent briefings that are unusually thorough in their description of the program and the premises from which it proceeds. Parents are encouraged to question any and all aspects of the program. For the duration parents are sent written materials that keep parents informed of each phase of activity. Most importantly these activities occur in a program context that has made parental support an essential ingredient of the program. Parents are made to understand that A-R consists of an instructional partnership in which parents and teachers cultivate interdependence in the name of instructional effectiveness.

Four, A-R teaches reading by decoding. The alphabet is treated as a set of twenty-six distinct sounds and letters. These are then repeatedly associated with familiar objects so that eventual word recognition consists of joining a set of familiar sights and sounds.

To use an oversimplified example the word "man" might be taught by asking students named Martin, Ann and Nancy to stand sequentially next to each other. The class having mastered the letter sounds that begin the names, collectively combines the three sounds to read the word "man". The same word might as easily be taught using three objects. Thus might students arrange before the class a

map, an apple and a napkin. The nature of these activities are fully exploited to affirm the worth of the children and the culture of which they are a part. The children are presumed masters of names and scores of objects of a sufficiency to be an instructional resource. Children are presumed masters of the name and object sequential ordering that is essential to such teaching. Family members are urged to reinforce the letter sound associations at home and sometimes to teach words using familiar objects and situations. Action-Reading is an active, culturally democratic, instructional strategy. The context is one of reinforcement, support and reward and in the best sense of the phrase, "anybody can do it".

In my view, conventional social science wisdom, popular conceptions of the nature of black children, and the reality of urban education in 1975 would prompt the remark, "Vivian Johnson and her colleagues, against virtually insurmountable odds, have achieved the most extraordinary and dramatic success in teaching basic reading skills to a group of inner city black children." Conventional wisdom, in this context, presumes that children who are both poor and of color are virtually uneducable when taught in homogeneous groups. Jencks and Moynihan are among the best known exponents of the popular view that children who are poor and black represent an instructional challenge that may well be too great for the public schools. Conventional social science wisdom insists that there are no good city schools, and that it is neither practical nor feasible to consider their creation, making Ms. Johnson a virtual miracle maker. Such a view reinforces the popular notion that urban, black children are primitive in every aspect of their lives, including their educability. The reality of urban education is certainly grim enough to discourage interest in improved urban schooling, regardless of one's attitude toward the educability of black children. In these dim lights, Vivian Johnson is, indeed, a miracle maker to be lauded and much admired, and no wonder black children are seldom offered effective instruction.

Those of us who do not subscribe to conventional wisdom and are not burdened

by the racism and ethnocentrism that must inform popular opinion would be more disposed to say, "Vivian Johnson and her colleagues are to be commended for having created an instructional program that shows the relative ease with which black children can be taught to read." My point is that the instructional success of the Circle, Inc. Reading Program seems startling only because most black children are so poorly served by public schools. One of the more difficult aspects of this evaluation is the conflict between giving Vivian Johnson credit for an admirable piece of work, while acknowledging that the nature of black children does not require instructional genius. Such an acknowledgement strongly recommends Carnegie espousal of the efficacy of urban educational reform.

What are now to be shown are some elements of the Circle, Inc. program that are most essential to instructional success and most liable to replication. The overall intent of the program was to improve reading skills as a direct consequence of improved student self-concept. Student self-concept was to be improved by, first, involving the total family in the learning and, second, using instructional materials that are culturally relevant for black children.

I will assume that no discussion is required to show that student self-concept is strongly influenced by the quantity and quality of family participation in school activities. For purposes of this discussion, it may be sufficient to note the lack of black parent participation in Boston school affairs. The officially established parent organization in the Boston schools is the Home and School Association. That is a white organization with offices in the Public School Administration Building. The Home and School Association is visible, volatile, and aggressive in its opposition to desegregation and any other activity that is designed to explicitly advance the educational interests of black children. Parents, singly, or, in groups, who seek a role in school affairs outside of the Home and School Association meet formidable opposition from the Boston School Department which administers Boston's

schools. Boston has never elected a person of color to its school committee. Black personnel are proportionately under represented in all employment categories in the Boston schools and it is to be remembered that Boston has been adjudicated a segregated and discriminatory school system. Most importantly, the hostility of school personnel to black students and their parents is, and has been a constant source of black community aggravation. (For a discussion of these and related matters see the "HGSE Alumni Bulletin", Winter, 1974.) In these circumstances black parents have been historically reluctant to participate in school affairs. As is so often the case school personnel, when asked about black family participation lament their absence and put the cause to the apathy and idleness of the poor.

Thus there are two dramatically alternative ways of describing consistent and enthusiastic black family participation in the Circle Incorporated Reading Program. A Boston school administrator might marvel that, "Vivian Johnson and her colleagues were miraculously able to motivate these culturally deprived, apathetic parents to actually participate in organized school activities." The alternative is to note that "Vivian Johnson and her colleagues created an instructional program free from the segregated associations and other institutional characteristics that discourage black family participation in Boston school affairs." Whenever such circumstances prevail, it will be seen that black parents enthusiastically and consistently participate in school affairs. (See Ron Edmonds unpublished analysis of Citizen Reform Efforts in a Number of American Cities.) These remarks on parent participation proceed from my belief that most American schools are pathological in their response to income, color, and social class. At issue is whether and under what circumstances public schools might enter into a more appropriate relationship with students and parents who are poor and of color.

The Cureton Method, as used in the Circle program, required the training of

some family members in certain of the techniques of reading instruction. Circle Inc. created an intimate, interdependent relationship between family and program personnel. The relationship was intimate because program personnel went to great lengths to demonstrate their respect for the parents and their culture. Over time parents came to see that without their acceptance and support there could be no program. My view of these matters derives from my reading of Circle Inc. materials and certain of my own writings on delivering social service. The Circle Inc. materials were journals written by program personnel; notes on home study and pupil progress made by parents; papers on the project written by the director; study guides; training guides and instructional materials prepared by program personnel, parents and students. I have had conversations with program personnel and parents and have viewed the orientation film made for the program.

For the last few years I have extensively studied the circumstances of good and bad social service with special attention devoted to education. As discussed in my "Alternative Patterns for the Distribution of Social Services" good social service requires that clients (parents) be responded to as though they were constituents. The service must take its definition and purpose from those to be served. Most importantly clients must perceive of themselves as highly influential in defining the service and its uses.

The Circle Inc. program meets these conditions and thus justifies my reference to "intimate, interdependent program personnel, parent relationships."

In reviewing the internal records of the project, it is important to note that all participating families produced at least written weekly comments. Those comments permit two sets of observations. First, some families pursued at-home instruction more conscientiously and imaginatively than others. Second, all families practiced a level of at-home instruction sufficient to satisfy the minimum instructional requirements of the project. It is to be especially noted that

nothing of an extraordinary or exotic nature was done to sustain family participation in the program--unless a conscientious effort to teach reading skills can be counted extraordinary or exotic.

I had earlier remarked that consistent family participation requires relatively intimate interaction between the instructional program and the family. From the Corporation's point of view, the most critical issue here is the evidence that, given the opportunity, black families will provide their children the home environment and supportive milieu that seems so essential to effective schooling and so difficult to obtain by standard means of compensatory education. Standard compensatory education as defined in Title I of the ESEA or as practiced by Bereiter and Engleman treats those who are poor and of color as though they are "culturally deprived". In fact Bereiter and Engleman contend that the deprivation is "irreparable". Black parents must therefore face a demeaning and culturally autocratic experience in most of their school contacts. In such circumstances it has been hard to get black families to enthusiastically support the compensatory education programs that prevail in most public schools. The Circle Inc. program makes clear that black children can be offered effective compensatory education when the program is not tainted by cultural autocracy and ethnocentrism.

Noting the pattern of family participation in both training and teaching, it is reasonable to conclude that normal family activities were not substantially interrupted as a consequence of this program. Reading the journals, notes, and comments that describe family behavior, one can conclude that as little as an hour or two per day was enough to create the gains that characterize this program. Therefore, from the point of view of the applicability of the program to the school setting, the school day offers more than enough time to imitate the success under discussion here. It seems to me that what is illustrated by this program is not that great sophistication is required to be instructionally effective, but that the most simple circumstances, if supportive, are sufficient to exploit the

children's innate intelligence and eagerness to do things judged worthy by the social order of which they are a part.

Most parents had modest formal education and no background in teacher training. Despite that, the brief training program laid out for parents was quite sufficient and, in a matter of hours, intensive though they may have been, parents were provided with levels of competence that turned out to be more than sufficient for the instructional tasks at hand. The implication is that teachers of normal intelligence might as easily be prepared to teach these children, and others like them, to read. The critical ingredient is teacher willingness and readiness; teacher willingness to recognize the innate intellectual ability of the children and teacher readiness to bend every professional effort to the fulfilling of the school's instructional obligation to these children.

Under such circumstances ordinary men and women of ordinary in- [illegible] and impart a body of knowledge and a set of skills that improve reading among young children. The elementary teaching staff of an average city school could as easily impart the same skills. What would be required is a climate in which teachers fell obliged to thus proceed, and children feel that the object of the institution is to teach them things their parents want them to know.

From the Corporation's point of view, no conclusion to be drawn from this project is more profound than the foregoing. By maintaining this episode of instructional success, the Corporation permits the child advocate to press the point that school reform is an exclusively political issue. Successful instruction does not depend on esoteric and mystical strategies. Neither does it require superhuman men and women. The point being made by demonstration projects

of the Circle Inc. kind is that a mixture of instructional commitment, modest technique, and supportive milieu is sufficient to teach reading to black children who are poor.

No message is of greater moment in the making of public policy in 1975. By supporting successful teaching for those least served by existing educational arrangements, the Corporation keeps alive the prospect that when political climates support educational change proven programs will be available to be implemented.

Turning now to the second major element of the reading program's methodology, some observations are in order regarding the ethnic orientation of the instructional materials. Surely, by now, it is not necessary to establish the cultural autocracy and racial abrasiveness of textual materials in public schools. If the reader has been in any public school in recent years, then the reader has been able to note that, despite the ethnic rhetoric of the 1960's, most instructional materials in American public schools do not yet reflect the heterogeneity that describes our school age population. Our schools, thus, needlessly affront Americans of color by denying them their rightful place in descriptions of our society. This instance of cultural abrasion is illustrative of the extent to which American public schools erect needless obstacles in the path of black pupil progress. Remember that the Circle Incorporated Reading Program did not undertake any change in the nature of the instructional materials except altering ethnic orientation. Therefore, no new theory of learning needed to be mastered, no new mode of expression or communication needed to be learned. All that was wanted was a readiness to accurately describe people of color and certain of the circumstances of their lives in ways that furthered the instructional task.

The summary conclusion here is that proper ethnic orientation in texts does not make teaching easier, but a lack of orientation can make teaching more difficult.

The role of the children in preparing certain of their own textual materials is illustrative of an extremely important community role for projects of this kind. All who were a party to this project participated in the successful delivery of a much needed social service. The service was delivered to black people by black people. That is an extraordinary occasion for a number of reasons, not least among them: American social service functions best for those least in need of social service; Americans of color are in great need of social service and are denied both the service and the means to provide it themselves.

In such circumstances, black people must constantly struggle to create and maintain even a semblance of community. Even when persuaded that most social pathology resides in the majority, minorities still despair at the infrequency of social progress. In this context, it is of great moment that a large group of black people are parties to a successful occasion of social service. Under Vivian Johnson's leadership, trainers, consultants, and parents, numbering more than one hundred, participated in the Circle Incorporated Reading Program.

The nature of the program imparted invaluable organizational, administrative, and instructional skills that are exceeding rare among Americans of color. Such skills are even more rare when many of those Americans are of modest means and education. Thus might the Corporation credit itself with support for the black community that goes well beyond the explicit social service of this project.

Men and women who combine institutional experience and confidence are an incalculable asset in the long range development of community constructs that are alternative to the inequitable norms of our social services.

I turn now to whether, and under what circumstances, one might replicate the instructional success of the Circle Inc. program. For our purposes, this question is most critical in public schools. In my judgement, the Circle Incorporated Reading Program can be successfully replicated in any elementary school in which the institutional decision makers had decided to thus proceed.

The principal elements of the program are: home participation in, or support for, the Cureton instructional strategy; the introduction of textual materials that recognize and describe the black experience; instructional personnel that feel obligated to convey literacy skills.

I want to close this brief discussion by examining the relative ease with which public schools might replicate the major elements of the Circle Incorporated Reading Program. I earlier stated that the Cureton Method required a relatively intimate relationship between home and school. Certainly, such a relationship prevailed in the instant case. Such a relationship exists in any institution in which personnel believe, for any reason, that they are ultimately answerable to the most numerous of those they serve. Thus, ingredient number one in reproducing Circle's success is to instruct, persuade, coerce, or otherwise convey to public school personnel the belief that they must satisfy their students and the students' parents, or bear the burden of presumed teacher failure. It is quite feasible to identify or create circumstances in which school personnel feel answerable to the most numerous of the students and parents they serve.

The attached evidence of improved pupil performance is unambiguous in demonstrating the easy educability of urban, black children who are poor. Examination discloses that parents and program personnel were taught certain specific instructional strategies that decoded reading as a skill and imparted to pupils the successive sets of skills that describe reading word mastery. The important point here is that the requisite instructional behaviors are virtually mechanical. The nature of the parents and the circumstances under which they worked ought to make it clear that, in and of itself, instructional strategy does not demand greater resources than now exist in every school in the United States. More importantly, the Cureton strategies are only one of a multitude of strategies that can be used in the successful teaching of black children. The point is that, despite widely heralded counter claims, black children are easily educable whenever their schooling is free from racism, ethnocentrism, and the other pathologies that prevail among our social service institutions.

Circle Inc. set out to explicitly create materials that acknowledge and describe the black experience in America. Physical portrayal, geographic setting, and cultural context were attended to in ways that made instructional materials an extension of the lives of the children to be taught. Having seen the materials, and many like them, I can assure you that they require nothing more than the certain knowledge that millions of Americans are black, are likely to remain so, and find their condition natural, if not positively desirable. Whites who work in schools, foundations, and similar social service settings are hard put to grasp that simple truth. Even so, my own experience and settings that are liable to easy examination demonstrate that

whites can be trained to behave in ways that are grounded in ethnic reality. It is important to note here that ethnic orientation is not itself an instructional strategy. The absence of accurate ethnic orientation is an instructional obstacle. All American schools are capable of materials acquisition, curricular design, and physical decor that is not a source of ethnic abrasion. Such schools exist and can be brought into being rather quickly when the institutional climate will support such a move.

Finally, we come to the last and most indispensable ingredient of successful schooling in general and the Circle Reading Program in particular. Vivian Johnson and her colleagues conceived of themselves as working for the students and their parents. Ms. Johnson believed in the educability of the students and, more importantly, thought it her responsibility to further that education. There are no good schools in which a similar view does not prevail. For so long as examples like the Circle Inc. program continue, child advocates in Boston and elsewhere can continue to press for better schools for all our children.